

You take it all away, but never give it back

Est

"It's just like all the others, it'll go away

Or maybe this is danger, and he just don't know

You pray it all away, but it continues to grow."

After two nights at Tui's house, all I wanted was my own space. His apartment was comfortable—familiar, safe, full of the kind of warmth that came from years of friendship. But it wasn't mine. It didn't have my sheets, my pillows, my particular arrangement of mess that somehow made sense to my brain. It didn't have the specific silence of a space that belonged only to me. So when Tui left for the studio that morning, I gathered my things and headed home.

My apartment greeted me with its usual quiet. I dropped the equipment case in the dining room, the heavy thud echoing off the walls. The camera bag followed, slumping against the table leg like it was as tired as I was. I'd deal with it later. I'd deal with everything later.

Right now, I just needed to not be on.

My apartment was exactly as I had left it. Silent. Still. A time capsule from before the William disaster. My bedroom was exactly as I'd left it—bed unmade, clothes from my pre-disaster outfit still draped over the chair, the faint smell of the cologne I'd worn to William's apartment lingering in the air like a ghost.

I closed the door. Plugged in my phone. Kicked off my shoes.

It was Friday. The end of the workweek. Most people were counting down the hours until a wonderful weekend—plans with friends, dates, parties, the promise of two days without obligations.

I just wanted to sleep. The bed swallowed me whole, sheets tangling around my legs, pillow cool against my cheek. I closed my eyes and let the exhaustion take me.

I woke to my phone buzzing.

The room was different—brighter, the afternoon sun slanting through the curtains at an angle that told me I'd been out for hours. I fumbled for the phone, squinting at the screen.

2:14 PM.

A message from Tui.

I opened it, still half-asleep, and found a photo.

Hong was in the foreground, making a peace sign with his fingers, his silver hair catching the light. His expression was somewhere between amused and exasperated—his default, from what I'd observed. Behind him, slightly out of focus, Tui was leaning over the tattoo table, machine in hand. The client beneath him was grimacing, face twisted in the particular agony of a rib piece. They were in the back parlor—the private room without the window, where clients who needed discretion or just couldn't handle an audience got their work done. The lighting was warm, the atmosphere intimate despite the obvious pain happening in the background.

I smiled despite myself.

Tui: Tui says hi. Also this guy is regretting his life choices. Ribs are brutal.

Me: Tell your client that suffering builds character.

Tui: I'll pass that along. He might cry.

I set the phone aside and stared at the ceiling for a moment. The nap had helped—my head felt clearer, my body less like it had been dragged behind a bus. But my stomach was making itself known, growling with the insistence of someone who'd barely eaten in two days.

Time to face the kitchen.

The refrigerator was a disappointment.

I stood in front of it, door open, cold air spilling out, and surveyed the wasteland within. Half a carton of eggs, probably expired. Some wilted vegetables I'd bought with good intentions and promptly ignored. Condiments. A suspicious container of something I couldn't identify.

After the week I'd had, the idea of going to the supermarket felt insurmountable. All those people, all that noise, all those choices to make when I could barely decide if I wanted to keep breathing.

Delivery it is.

I scrolled through the app on my phone, searching for something that wouldn't make my still-recovering stomach revolt. My eyes landed on a place that promised comfort food—the kind of greasy, salty, carb-heavy meal that was scientifically designed to cure hangovers and heartbreak alike.

Delivery in under 30 minutes.

Perfect.

I placed the order and drank three glasses of water while I waited, forcing myself to

hydrate despite my body's protests. Tui's voice echoed in my head: You're going to feel like death if you don't drink water. He'd been right, as usual.

The food arrived in twenty-seven minutes. I tipped the delivery driver generously—a small act of kindness that felt meaningful in a way I couldn't quite articulate—and carried the bag to my small dining table.

The spread was exactly what I needed. Rice. Something fried. Something with enough salt to rebalance whatever the alcohol had stripped away. Steam rose from the containers, carrying the smell of comfort and survival.

Before I ate, I took a picture.

It wasn't artful—not the carefully composed shots I took for work, not the intentional framing I used when I was trying to capture something meaningful. Just a quick snapshot of the food, the table, my hand reaching toward a fork.

I sent it to Tui.

Me: Sustenance acquired. Thank you for everything.

The response came almost immediately.

Tui: Eating! Progress! I'm proud of you.

Tui: Now drink more water.

Me: Yes mom

Tui: Don't make me come over there

I smiled—a real smile, one that reached my eyes for the first time in what felt like forever.

I ate slowly. Not because I was savoring it, but because my stomach needed time to adjust to the idea of food again. Each bite was a small victory, a reminder that my body still worked, still needed fuel, still wanted to keep going even when my heart felt like giving up.

I owed Tui so much. The sleepover. The bar night. The office visit this morning. The steady presence, the practical help, the refusal to let me spiral into complete disaster. He'd held me together when I was falling apart, without asking for anything in return. That was friendship. Real friendship. The kind that showed up and stayed, even when it was inconvenient, even when it was messy.

I'll pay him back, I thought. Somehow. Someday.

For now, I finished my food. Drank more water. Cleaned up the containers.

Small tasks. Small victories.

The apartment was quiet around me.

My camera bag sat in the dining room, untouched. Inside it, the memory card full of images from William's apartment. The last thing I had of him—those technically proficient, emotionally flat photographs that documented the moment before everything shattered.

I wasn't ready to look at them.

Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next week. Maybe never. For now, I just needed to exist. To eat and sleep and drink water and answer Tui's texts. To take it one step at a time, the way everyone kept telling me to. I walked back to my bedroom, phone in hand, and lay down on the bed again. The ceiling stared back at me, blank and patient.

One step at a time, I reminded myself.

You're still here.

That has to count for something.

The afternoon stretched out in front of me like a long, empty road.

I lay on my bed, phone in hand, scrolling through social media with the mindless dedication of someone who didn't want to think. The blue light of the screen washed over my face, familiar and numbing. Former university classmates populated my feed. Engagement photos. New jobs. Vacations to places I couldn't afford. Someone had gotten a dog. Someone else had gotten married. Their lives unfolded in carefully curated squares, each one a small monument to progress and happiness.

I kept scrolling.

Tui's studio had posted new content.

Welcome photos for Yuki—her standing in front of the neon sign, her traditional sleeves on display, her quiet smile. Then shots of her work from Japan, intricate irezumi pieces that made me want to study the lines for hours. The compositions were solid, the lighting clean.

A tattoo of a flower with a spider on top. Probably Hong's work, I thought. He was getting better.

Speaking of Hong—I found myself clicking through to his private account, the one he kept separate from the studio's official presence. His feed was sparse, artistic, full of the kind of images that revealed more about his inner world than any words could.

One photo caught my attention.

A donut, held up in delicate hands with long nails—painted a deep burgundy, I noticed. Through the hole in the center, Hong's face was visible, silver hair catching the light, a genuine smile on his usually reserved features.

The composition was playful, unexpected. Not something I would have associated with the quiet, mysterious artist I'd met at the studio. Probably taken at his university, I guessed, noting the background—a crowded café, students blurred in the edges of the frame.

There was a caption: Sugar helps.

I smiled despite myself and kept scrolling.

The photos from the studio reminded me. I'd taken shots during my time there—the behind-the-scenes documentation, the artist profiles, the images I'd promised Tui for social media. They were still sitting on my camera's memory card, unedited, waiting.

Work I could actually do. Something productive to fill the empty hours.

I dragged myself out of bed and retrieved my laptop from the desk. The familiar weight of it was grounding, the glow of the screen as it booted up a kind of comfort. I connected the camera, imported the files, and lost myself in the editing.

The work was good.

Better than I'd expected, honestly. I'd been half-present during those hours at the studio, still reeling from the disaster at William's apartment, but my instincts had carried me through. The compositions were strong. The lighting was intentional. Yuki's technique was captured in sharp, revealing detail; Tui's focus was palpable even in still images. These weren't just social media fodder. These were good enough for the website. Good enough to be proud of. I adjusted levels, cropped where necessary, applied the color grading that matched the studio's aesthetic. Each edit was a small victory, a reminder that I was still capable of creating something worthwhile.

When I finished, I packaged the files and sent them to Tui.

Me: Edited the studio shots. These are website quality, not just social. Let me know what you think.

The reply came a few minutes later.

Tui: These are incredible. You're a genius.

Me: I'm a mess who happens to own a camera

Tui: A mess with TALENT. Now stop deflecting and accept the compliment.

Me: Fine. Thank you.

Tui: That's better.

The email notification appeared while I was still smiling at my phone. I clicked over to my inbox, expecting spam, expecting nothing important. What I found made my stomach drop.

Subject: RE: William Jakrapatr Exhibition - Updated Scope

The message was from the agency—William's people. Professional, polished, carefully worded in that corporate way that said everything and nothing.

I scanned the contents, my heart rate climbing with each line.

Following recent developments... reassessment of project parameters... mutual agreement between all parties...

The translation was simple enough: everything was canceled.

The artist portraits. The studio shots. The behind-the-scenes documentation. All of it, scrapped.

Except for one thing.

Event coverage for the opening night remains as scheduled. Your services have been retained for this portion of the contract.

I stared at the words. They were only keeping me for the event because they'd already paid. Because it would be more complicated to find someone else. Because I was a line item on a budget that had already been approved.

Not because William wanted me there. Not because anyone thought I was the best person for the job. Just... logistics.

I closed my laptop and sat back. The afternoon light had shifted, going golden and warm through my curtains. Outside, the city was probably beautiful—all those long shadows and soft edges that photographers lived for. I didn't move to capture it.

William didn't want to resume the sessions.

The words echoed in my head, sharp and final. He'd made his choice. He'd retreated behind his walls, closed the door, let his management handle the mess he'd created.

And I was left here, scrolling through the wreckage.

I could let this break me.

That would be easy, actually. Curl up in bed, stop eating, stop working, let the grief swallow me whole. Become exactly what my worst fears predicted—someone who couldn't survive rejection, who fell apart at the first sign of abandonment.

No.

I took a deep breath. Then another.

William didn't get to keep playing with my head. With my heart. He'd made his choice, and I had to make mine.

I checked the time: 6 PM.

Decision made.

The bath was a ritual. I filled the tub with water as hot as I could stand, letting steam cloud the small bathroom. Music played from my phone—something soft and ambient, the kind of playlist that demanded nothing from the listener.

I slid into the water and felt my muscles unknot, one by one.

The face mask was ridiculous—a gift from a skincare brand I'd photographed months ago, still sitting unopened in my cabinet. It was shaped like an animal, some kind of cartoon creature with big eyes and a cheerful expression.

I put it on anyway.

The mirror showed me something absurd: a grown man with a panda face, dark circles barely visible beneath the sheet mask, steam rising around him like some kind of fever dream.

I laughed.

It was a weak sound, still fragile around the edges, but it was real.

The water cooled eventually.

I drained the tub, peeled off the mask, patted my skin dry with the gentleness the instructions recommended. My face felt different—softer, somehow. Like I'd shed a layer of something.

Self-care, I thought with mild disbelief. I'm actually doing self-care.

Tui would be proud.

I wrapped myself in my favorite robe—old and slightly ratty, but impossibly soft—and padded back to my bedroom. The evening stretched out before me, quiet and mine.

Tomorrow could bring new disasters. Next week, I'd have to face the opening night, stand in the same room as William, pretend to be professional while my heart ached.

But tonight, I was clean and fed and alive.

I stood in front of my closet, clean pajamas forgotten in my hands.

The photos kept cycling through my mind. All those former classmates, living their lives, moving forward. Engagements and promotions and vacations and dogs. Everyone progressing while I stood still. And then—the memory of last night. The bar. The music. The guy with the dark hair and easy confidence who'd pulled me onto the dance floor.

I'd been happy, for a few hours. Drunk and reckless and alive.

And because I'd been so drunk, I hadn't gotten his number. Hadn't even asked his name.

The email sat in my inbox like a tombstone. Event coverage for the opening night remains as scheduled. Everything else—canceled. Deleted. Erased. Whatever I'd thought I was building with William, whatever future I'd imagined in my weaker moments—it had all been in my head. The connection, the understanding, the way he'd looked at me like I was something worth seeing. A fantasy. Nothing more.

The pajamas went back in the drawer.

I reached for something else entirely.

Tui would be upset if he knew.

Two nights in a row, going out alone, drinking myself into oblivion. He'd give me that look—the one that said I'm worried about you without actually saying the words. He'd try to talk me down, try to redirect me toward healthier coping mechanisms.

But Tui wasn't here.

And I didn't want to be healthy tonight. I wanted to be reckless. I wanted to feel something other than this hollow ache in my chest.

I dressed with intention this time. Not the borrowed clothes from yesterday, but my



own—chosen carefully to attract attention without looking like I was trying too hard. White t-shirt, fitted but not tight. Denim jacket that matched my jeans—a calculated coordination that looked casual. Necklace, silver and simple. Ring on my index finger. Watch on my wrist.

I did my makeup. Nothing dramatic—just enough to make my eyes look sharper, my cheekbones more defined. Concealer over the dark circles that still lingered. Perfume. Hair styled deliberately messy. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw someone who was fine. Someone who had his life together. Someone who definitely wasn't falling apart. Good enough.

I decided to eat on the way.

My favorite restaurant—a small Italian place I hadn't visited in months, Tonight, I didn't care about my wallet. Tonight, I ordered pasta and wine and let the flavors fill the emptiness inside me.

The wine was good. Better than good. I had two glasses, letting the warmth spread through my chest. The bill was obscene. I paid it anyway.

The bar was different on a Friday night. More crowded. More chaotic. The music louder, the lights brighter, the smell of cigarettes and sweat and alcohol thick in the air. Bodies pressed together on the dance floor, moving to a beat I could feel in my bones.

I pushed my way to the bar and ordered something strong.

The night began.

It passed in fragments after that.

Drinks, one after another. Dancing with strangers who didn't ask questions, who only wanted the press of a body against theirs.

A group of girls adopted me somewhere around drink four—bright and loud and generous with their laughter. They bought me shots I shouldn't have accepted. I bought them drinks in return. We became temporary best friends, the way you do in bars at midnight, swearing we'd keep in touch when we both knew we wouldn't.

I danced with one of them, then another. Then a guy who appeared at my elbow, handsome and nothing like William. Good. I thought. Different is good.

He pulled me closer on the dance floor. His hands were warm through my shirt. When he kissed me, I kissed him back—hard, desperate, trying to fill the void with

sensation.

It didn't work but I kept trying.

The bathroom was harsh under the fluorescent lights.

I'd stumbled away from the dance floor, away from the guy whose name I still didn't know, suddenly unable to breathe. The music was muffled behind the closed door, but my heart was pounding loud enough to compensate.

I gripped the sink and stared at my reflection.

My makeup was smudged. My hair had lost its careful styling. I looked like someone coming undone.

William.

The name surfaced unbidden, sharp and painful.

I pulled out my phone.

The calls started before I could stop myself.

First call. Ringing. No answer.

Second call. Ringing. Voicemail.

Third. Fourth. Fifth.

I lost count somewhere after ten.

"Answer the phone," I muttered, pacing the small bathroom. "Just answer." But he didn't. Of course he didn't. William didn't answer phones. William hid behind closed doors and professional emails and the convenient excuse of his mental health.

Fifteenth call. Twentieth.

The voicemail picked up again, and this time I left a message. "Why?" My voice was ragged, thick with alcohol and barely suppressed tears. "Why did you do this? What's wrong with me? What did I do that was so terrible you had to—" I choked on the words. "I just want to know why, William. I deserve that much. I deserve an explanation."

I hung up. Called again. Left another message. "You said you didn't want to be alone anymore. You said that. And then you threw me out like I was nothing. Like everything we—like I was nothing."

My eyes were stinging. I wiped at them with the back of my hand, smearing my

makeup further. "Call me back. Please. Just... please."

I don't remember leaving the bar. I don't remember hailing the taxi, don't remember giving the address.

But suddenly I was there—standing on the sidewalk outside William's building, the cold night air biting through my denim jacket. The city was quiet at this hour, whatever hour it was. Dark and still, the streetlights casting long shadows across the pavement.

I stared up at the glass and steel tower.

Seventeen floors up, William was probably sleeping. Or painting. Or staring at the ceiling, lost in whatever darkness lived inside his head. And I was here. Drunk and desperate and embarrassing myself in ways I'd regret in the morning. But I couldn't make myself leave.

I pulled out my phone. Called again.

Straight to voicemail.

He turned his phone off.

The realization hit like a physical blow. He'd seen my calls—all twenty-something of them—and he'd turned his phone off rather than answer. I stood there on the sidewalk, swaying slightly, the cold seeping into my bones.

What am I doing here?

The answer was obvious, pathetic, undeniable: I was falling apart. Publicly, spectacularly, in front of the building where the person who'd broken my heart was hiding from me. The security guard was watching me through the lobby window. Probably debating whether to call someone.

I should go home.

I should call Tui.

I should do anything other than stand here like a ghost, haunting a building where I was no longer welcome. But my feet wouldn't move and the night pressed in around me, cold and dark and merciless.

Even if i had to scream all the way to the 17th floor, I would get them.

The elevator ride was a blur—my hand on the wall for support, my reflection in the mirrored doors looking like a stranger. Wild-eyed. Tear-streaked. Unhinged.

And then I was there. Standing in front of William's door.

The same door that had closed in my face. The same door I'd stared at from the hallway floor. The same door that represented everything I'd lost.

I pulled out my phone. One more try.

Voicemail.

I shoved the phone back in my pocket and knocked.

Once. Twice.

Louder.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

"William!" My voice cracked. "Open the door!" My fist connected with the wood again and again, the sound echoing through the empty hallway. Tears were streaming down my face now, hot and unstoppable.

"I know you're in there! I know you can hear me!"

Bang. Bang.

"Just talk to me! That's all I'm asking! Just—"

The door opened.

William stood in the doorway.

He looked terrible.

Paint-stained pajamas—the old ones, the comfortable ones he'd worn when he wasn't performing for anyone. His face was pale, paler than I remembered, and the dark circles under his eyes were deep enough to look like bruises. There was a cut above his nose, fresh enough to still be red, and I wondered briefly if he'd done it himself or if it was from the jar of brushes he'd thrown.

He stared at me. I stared back. All the words I'd prepared—all the accusations, all the questions, all the curses I'd rehearsed during the taxi ride—evaporated.

Instead, I kissed him.

It wasn't like our first kiss.

That one had been tentative, soft, full of possibility. A question asked and answered in the press of lips.

This was violence.

I grabbed his face and pulled him toward me, crashing my mouth against his with all the desperation and anger and grief I'd been carrying. He tasted like nothing—like absence—but his lips moved against mine and that was enough.

He kissed me back.

For one terrible, beautiful moment, he kissed me back. His hands found my jacket, gripping the denim, pulling me closer even as his body stayed rigid with tension. The kiss was rough, too hard, teeth clashing, more pain than pleasure. It wasn't gentle. It wasn't romantic. It was a collision. A desperate, angry claim. I pressed my mouth against his hard enough to bruise, tasting salt and stale alcohol and something that tasted like grief.

When we finally broke apart, I was crying again. Sobbing, actually. The kind of ugly, heaving sobs that came from somewhere deep and refused to stop.

"What did I do wrong?" The words poured out of me like water through a broken dam.

"Why did you let me in if you were just going to kick me out?" William's eyes were wide, shocked. His lips parted, but nothing came out.

"I thought you wanted to try. You said you wanted to try."

I was drowning. Drowning in questions, in tears, in the overwhelming certainty that something was fundamentally broken inside me.

"What is wrong with me? Tell me what is wrong with me so I can fix it, Please. Just tell me what to fix."

William stared at me.

He didn't speak.

Couldn't speak, maybe. His expression was frozen somewhere between horror and grief, and I watched him struggle to form words that wouldn't come.

The floor beneath my feet started to move.

Oh no.

The world tilted. Spun. My stomach lurched in warning.

I promised Tui I wouldn't throw up.

But promises meant nothing to an alcohol-soaked body pushed past its limits. I bent over and vomited. Right there, in the doorway, between William's bare feet and my own. The pasta and wine from dinner made a reappearance, splashing across the expensive hallway carpet.

Shit.

I'm disgusting.

The next few minutes came in fragments. Hands on my arms, guiding me inside. The cold tile of a bathroom floor beneath my knees. The porcelain rim of a toilet, unforgiving against my cheek. I was vomiting again. And again. My body purging everything—the alcohol, the emotions, the desperate hope that had driven me here in the first place.

Somewhere behind me, William was on the phone. His voice was low, urgent, but the words wouldn't coalesce into meaning. I caught fragments: "...here..." and "...can't..." and "...please..." Then nothing.

Arms lifted me from the bathroom floor. Not William's arms—I knew that instinctively. These were stronger, more confident in their grip. Familiar.

Tui.

I looked up at his face, blurred through my tears. He looked tired. Worried. Disappointed, maybe, but mostly just tired.

"How—" I tried to form the question. How was he here? Did William have his number? Did he ask Lego for it? Did Lego have her best friend's number? The questions drifted through my mind, unmoored. Tui seemed more smitten with Lego than he wanted to admit. Were they flirting? Did they exchange contacts to coordinate rescuing me from my own disasters? The thoughts spiraled uselessly.

Tui was carrying me toward the door. William was somewhere behind us—I could feel his presence, could almost hear him breathing—but I couldn't turn to look. Couldn't face whatever expression was on his face.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled into Tui's shoulder. "I'm really sorry."

He didn't respond. Just kept walking.

The taxi ride was another blur.

I slumped against the window, the cold glass a relief against my feverish skin. Tui sat beside me, his hand on my shoulder, grounding me to reality.

Bangkok scrolled past outside—all those lights, all those lives, all those people who weren't currently falling apart in the back of a cab.

I envied them.

When we pulled up in front of Ink & Ashes, I vomited again. Right there on the

sidewalk, in front of Tui's building. The security cameras probably got an excellent view. Perfect, I thought deliriously. Just perfect.

Tui helped me up. Half-carried me up the stairs—third step, seventh step, the warped landing. And as we climbed the stairs to his apartment, leaving the disaster of the night behind us on the street, I knew it was true. I was a mess. A broken, vomiting, crying mess.—and through his apartment door.

I was crying again. Or still. I couldn't tell anymore. "Sorry." I sobbed, clinging to him like a child. "I'm really sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Tui just patted my back. Slow, steady strokes, the way you'd comfort a frightened animal. "I know." he said quietly. "I know."

He got me to the couch somehow. Stripped off my vomit-splattered jacket. Brought me water that I tried to drink and mostly spilled. Found a bucket and placed it strategically on the floor beside me.

"Stay here," he said. "I'll get you something clean to wear." I nodded weakly, too exhausted to argue.

The apartment was dark around me. Quiet. Safe in a way that William's apartment had never been.

I stared at the ceiling and tried to remember how I'd gotten here. Not just to Tui's couch tonight, but to this point in my life. Standing in hallways, screaming at closed doors. Kissing men who couldn't love me back. Vomiting on sidewalks and sobbing apologies to the only friend who still answered my calls.

God, I'm such a mess.

The thought was almost funny. Almost. Tui returned with a t-shirt and sweatpants. Helped me change, which was humiliating in a distant, muted way. Then he sat down beside me on the couch and just... stayed.

"You're not going to yell at me?" I asked eventually.

"Would it help?"

"No."

"Then no." He sighed, leaning his head back. "We'll talk tomorrow. When you're sober. When you can actually process what I'm saying."

"Okay."

"For now, just sleep. Try not to throw up on my couch."

"I'll try."

He squeezed my shoulder once, then stood. I heard him moving around the apartment—getting blankets, maybe, or just giving me space.

I closed my eyes.

The world was still spinning, but slower now. Manageable.

Tomorrow, I thought. I'll deal with everything tomorrow.

And then, mercifully, sleep took me.